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# The Diminishing Role of the Ombudsman in American Journalism

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The Diminishing Role of the Ombudsman in American Journalism

by

Wade B. Hilligoss

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Journalism and Mass Communications

Under the Supervision of Associate Professor Barney McCoy

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 2014

# THE DIMINISHING ROLE OF THE OMBUDSMAN IN AMERICAN JOURNALISM

Wade Brayton Hilligoss, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2014

Adviser: Barney McCoy

News ombudsmen have been around since 1967 when two Louisville newspapers created a position that served as an independent accountability buffer between the newspapers and the publics they served. That position was called the news ombudsman. Its role was to respond to reader complaints, call out newspaper errors and explain behind-the-scenes news decisions, processes and more in a weekly or bi-weekly column in the Sunday paper. In 1970, the Washington Post created an ombudsman position and other news outlets followed over the next 30 years. The New York Times instituted its first ombudsman in 2003 after the Jason Blair plagiarism scandal and the ombudsman role became more popular around the country.

Then in the late 2000's the news ombudsman position began to decline in the United States and continues to decline today. Once hovering at around 40-50, there are now only a dozen or so ombudsmen working in U.S. news organizations. Coincidentally, the declining ombudsmen numbers in the U.S. come at a time when opinion polls indicate the American people have growing trust issues with the news media, and are a sharp contrast to news ombudsmen positions internationally which are growing in number and popularity. This paper will use mixed methods surveys to explore why the ombudsman position is declining in America and if it can or should exist moving forward.

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## I: Introduction

The ombudsman of a journalistic organization is meant to act as an independent arbiter between an organization's news staff and the public that consumes its news. Most of the time, this person is hired by the leadership of the news organization on a fixed term or with a clause stating they cannot be terminated based on the work they do. The ombudsman is allowed space, either in print, online or on the air to present his or her independent thoughts on how their news organization is functioning.

The website for the Organization of News Ombudsmen's definition of a news ombudsman:

*A news ombudsman receives and investigates complaints from newspaper readers or listeners or viewers of radio and television stations about accuracy, fairness, balance and good taste in news coverage. He or she recommends appropriate remedies or responses to correct or clarify news reports. (LaPointe, 2013)*

Proponents of news ombudsmen point out their ability to funnel reader complaints and questions to a larger number of people. They say ombudsmen can reduce libel lawsuits, strengthen the news organization's relationship with the public, are independent and help the news organization's credibility (Meyers, 2000).

Ombudsmen are in positions within news organizations to make useful contributions to media accountability and credibility (Klaidman & Beauchamp, 1987). Organizational credibility is both perceived and realized (Nolan & Marjoribanks, 2008), and having an ombudsman furthers the prospects of both.

### ***Statement of Problem***

There are conflicting thoughts on the future of the ombudsman position in America. Some in academic and journalistic fields are not optimistic about the future of the ombudsman in news. There are many reasons why. One reason is the Internet. As Kenny and Ozkan write, “The debate over news ombudsmen remains at a seemingly irreconcilable impasse, and less relevant as journalism shifts away from print and traditional newsroom structures in the new media age” (2011). However on the other side of the argument, Meier writes transparency has “a significantly greater potential in the Internet” (2009) when it comes to ombudsmen.

### ***Justification***

The goal of this study is to determine why news ombudsmen are diminishing in numbers in the United States and what we might expect moving forward.

According to the Organization of News Ombudsmen (ONO) and my own research, there are currently between a dozen and two dozen news ombudsmen in the United States. There were approximately 1,700 daily U.S. newspapers in 1987 (Klaidman & Beauchamp). In 2012, that number dropped to 1,382 daily papers (Newspaper Association of America). If one were to add dozens of national news channels and news bureaus operating in television, the Internet, a wide range of blogs, and online-only sources, a maximum of 24 ombudsmen doesn’t seem high.

According to Kruger, audiences take mistakes seriously, and they care about accuracy (2007). He writes that when a news outlet admits and corrects mistakes, it helps develop credibility among readers or viewers. He says when a news outlet builds a

reputation of correcting mistakes and not hiding from problems, its public will trust it (2007).

Claassen writes it is a radical and commendable move to place even a few inches of your own newspaper (or air time) beyond your direct control (2007). He adds that having an ombudsman may make reporters think twice about their methods during news gathering and is in agreement with Meyers and his stance on reduced libel suits.

Furthermore, Meyers writes the major advantage of transparency in journalism is the public “gains a better understanding of the news machinery” and that “journalism is under threat from a crisis of credibility” (2009).

Many news outlets that have had an ombudsman position for more than 10 or 20 years are now eliminating the position. Many of these are prominent, well-run, nationally-lauded news organizations. For example, the Washington Post eliminated its ombudsman position in March 2013 when the contract of its ombudsman Patrick Pexton ran out. Instead of following previous protocol by replacing Pexton, The Post eliminated the ombudsman’s position and replaced it with a “reader’s representative.” The Post’s reader representative does not have a spot in the Sunday paper and is overall less-encompassing (Pexton, 2013). It marked the first time in 43 years the paper did not have a full time ombudsman or external reader representative (Pexton, 2013).

Pexton himself saw the change in the Post’s ombudsman position coming. “For cost-cutting reasons and because The Post, like other news organizations, is financially weaker and hence even more sensitive to criticism, my bet is that this position will disappear,” he wrote in one of his final articles (2013).

Washington Post Publisher Katharine Weymouth wrote a short note to readers after Pexton left the paper in 2013. She announced the ombudsman position would be replaced with a reader representative, but skirted the reasoning by saying the ombudsmen is a thing of the past.

“The world has changed, and we at The Post must change with it,” Weymouth said. “In short, while we are not filling a position that was created decades ago for a different era, we remain faithful to the mission. We know that you, our readers, will hold us to that, as you should.”

ONO Executive Director Jeffrey Dvorkin told me the loss of Pexton and the position from the Washington Post was “a setback for sure.” His reasoning was that the Post was ONO’s former “jewel in the crown of ombuds.”

In another high profile example, the Boston Globe’s Richard Chacon left his post as ombudsman in 2006 to join Deval Patrick’s campaign for governor of Massachusetts (Chacon, 2006). Eight years later, The Globe has yet to appoint Patrick’s successor for reasons the paper has never explained. This is a topic that has elicited a strong outcry in the journalism industry. When the last ombudsman in the entire state of Washington was eliminated, the Washington News Council, a non-profit watchdog agency, stepped up and announced it would serve as ombudsman to all Washington news outlets (Hamer, 2013). Ombudsmen are becoming a rarer breed and ombudsman positions, when vacated, are rarely replaced.

Based on recent studies, these changes and elimination of the ombudsman come at a tough time within the current landscape of American journalism. Studies by Pew



(2009) and Gallup (2012) indicate that Americans wrestle with their confidence in media more than at any time in the recent past.

In 2009, shortly after the loss of more than a dozen ombudsmen, the Pew Research Center released a study which showed the “press accuracy rating” had hit a two-decade low. To be clear, this is not to infer a direct correlation with the drop in ombudsman, only to point out the numbers are similarly dropping. Furthermore, according to the Pew study, 29 percent of Americans said “news organizations generally get the facts straight” which is down from 55 percent in 1985 for a variety of reasons beyond the dip in ombudsman numbers (2009). Also, the study said just 18 percent of Americans feel the press “deals fairly with both sides” when covering an issue or topic, down from 34 percent in 1985. Furthermore, 63 percent perceived “stories are often inaccurate” which is up from 34 percent in 1985 (2009).

A 2014 study by Gallup found trust in the media was at an all-time low. Gallup surveyed respondents from 1997-2014. Its findings showed 40 percent of respondents when asked about their trust in media answered they have “not very much” or none at all” (2014). That is down from 60 percent distrust in 2012, 50 percent in 2005 and a previous survey-low 44 percent in 1999. Interestingly, spikes in distrust came in 2012, 2008, 2004 and 2000, general election years. The results section of the survey points out Gallup asked similar questions over the past few decades and that “media trust” was “as high as 72%” during three studies they conducted in the 1970’s.

Gallup opines at the end of this study:

“Though a sizable percentage of Americans continue to have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media, Americans' overall trust in the Fourth Estate continues to be significantly lower now than it was 10 to 15 years ago.

As the media expand into new domains of news reporting via social media networks and new mobile technology, Americans may be growing disenchanted with what they consider "mainstream" news as they seek out their own personal veins of information. At the same time, confidence is down across many institutions, and a general lack in trust overall could be at play.” (2014)

### ***Research Questions***

The questions I will attempt to answer in this thesis are as follows:

- What factors are leading to the declining number of ombudsmen?
- What can, and what are ombudsmen being replaced with, if anything?
- What will the news ombudsman position look like moving forward?
- Are news ombudsmen wanted by those who work in a newsroom?

## **II. Background**

### ***Operational Definition***

There are many different types of ethics editors or internal review methods within news organizations. Some are omniscient, or all-knowing, journalists while others are privileged readers (Cline, 2008). This paper will focus on the broader definition of an ombudsman.

In this paper, the term “news ombudsman,” also written in plural form as “ombudsmen” and informally as “ombud,” will stand for any position within a news organization where someone is a standards and ethics overseer on either a fixed contract, a set term or designated as protected from termination for doing his or her job.

Other terms used in a newsroom or in academia similar to ombudsman include public editor, readers’ representative, advisor on journalism ethics, ethics editor, readers’ editor, readers’ advocate, community advocate or standards editor (Evers, 2012). Moving forward in this thesis, they are wrapped up together as ombudsman. Note that the term is not gender specific. In fact, some think the term is sexist (Kenny & Ozkan, 2011). While some publications refer to female ombudsmen as an ombudswoman or ombudsperson, for clarity I will use “ombudsmen,” “ombudsman” and “ombud” to represent both sexes.

### ***Historical Background***

The term “ombudsman” is Swedish for “representative,” and German to mean part of a neutral group (Nemeth, 2003). The ombudsman began as a political appointee by Charles XII, the young king of Sweden, in 1697. The ombudsman kept an eye on the public good by making sure the government was correctly implementing the process and law of the land while he was out of the country. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century the king returned

and the ombudsman was no longer needed. The position went dormant for almost 100 years until Swedish Parliament reestablished it in 1809 when their new king was taken prisoner in Russia (Nemeth, 2003). From there, the position spread internationally. Muslim countries, China, and even Hawaii adopted forms of the ombudsman (Nemeth, 2003). Over time, the idea of the ombudsman spread to organizations, universities and corporations like newspapers and broadcast entities.

According to Hamer, the concept of the ombudsman in newspapers can actually be traced to the early 1910s (2013). In 1913, newspaper owner Ralph Pulitzer, eldest son of Joseph Pulitzer, created the Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play at his paper, The New York World (Hamer, 2013). He aimed to improve journalistic standards at a time when “yellow journalism” ran rampant. According to the Washington News Council, the director of this Bureau reviewed complaints from readers, collected answers and comments from newspaper staff, and wrote responses (2013).

The modern iteration of the news ombudsman did not come about until 1967. The first press ombudsman appeared in July of that year in the Louisville Courier-Journal and the Louisville Times. The first ombudsman with a space for a column in the newspaper was the Washington Post’s Richard Harwood in 1970. From there, the numbers slowly grew for the next 30 years (Nemeth, 2003).

In the early 1980’s, the Organization of News Ombudsmen was established as a place for these news ombuds to discuss their profession and ethics in news (Claassen, 2007) It now has members from six continents from all kinds of news media, including more than a dozen from the U.S.

The position gained steady support for the next 20 years, but the concept of the news ombudsman became most popular in 2003 when the New York Times named Daniel Okrent its first ombudsman in the wake of the Jason Blair scandal (Okrent, 2006). Blair, a rising star at the newspaper, plagiarized and fabricated sources and was subsequently fired. This may have been caught under normal managerial checks and balances if he were not such a heralded young reporter. Howell Raines was fired as the Times' editor in the wake of the controversy and replaced with Bill Keller. The Times is one of the leading news organizations in the United States. Not long after the paper added Okrent, there was a slight boom in ombudsmen numbers around the country (Nemeth, 2003).

### ***More Recent History***

The U.S. news ombudsman is a position in decline, according to Dvorkin. He says between 2000 and 2004, ombudsmen numbers were at their highest at around 40-50 across the country.

When the financial crisis hit the country in 2008, between a dozen and two dozen ombudsmen were let go, discontinued or eliminated in some form, according to Dvorkin.

"The high-water mark for ombudsman in America has come and gone," Dvorkin told me in a conversation in late 2013. "We lost a few in the five or six years following the turn of the millennium, and of course we dropped so many in 2008 when the recession hit. Since that point we have added a few more. But it has been tough."

Dvorkin also said there are no hard statistics for the number of ombudsman, but between ONO's membership page, his research, and my own, it appears there are between 15 and 20 active ombudsmen in 2014.

According to Dvorkin and current ONO Executive Director Kirk LaPointe, the current list includes, but is not limited to: New York Times, Public Broadcasting Corp., Los Angeles Times, Toledo Blade, Cleveland Plain-Dealer, ESPN, Kansas City Star, National Public Radio, Cedar Rapids Gazette and San Antonio Express-News, along with a handful more of which ONO does not specifically have in its membership.

Approximately two dozen ombudsman jobs have been lost since 2000. These eliminations occurred across the country. According to information from Dvorkin and the websites of newspapers across the U.S., here is a partial list of known defunct ombudsman jobs since the turn of the century: Boston Globe, Washington Post, Raleigh News and Observer, Portland Oregonian, Miami Herald, St. Louis Post Dispatch, Sacramento Bee, Jacksonville Times-Union, Minneapolis Star Tribune, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Akron Beacon-Journal, Baltimore Sun, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Chicago Tribune, Orlando Sentinel, Philadelphia Daily News, Hartford Courant, Detroit Free Press, Palm Beach Post, Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, San Diego Union-Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, USA Today, Arizona Republic, Salt Lake Tribune, Arizona Daily Star, St. Paul Pioneer Press, Fort Myers News Press and the Louisville Courier-Journal which was the first modern U.S. ombudsman job.

Little has been written academically in the recent past about the decline of the ombudsman position. It is a relatively unreported and lightly researched topic. The closest and most in-depth look at ombudsman came in the American Journalism review. In the article, author and journalist Jennifer Darroh wrote:

In a nation with 1,500 daily newspapers, three network news operations, three cable news networks and countless radio and TV stations and Web sites, a roster

of fewer than 40 ombudsmen hardly signifies a groundswell. And that number has remained fairly constant for years. If the ombudsman's role is so wonderful, why aren't there more of them? (2005)

That question led Darroh into a series of anecdotes and short interviews outlining how and why some organizations have an ombudsman. Her approach focused on why ombudsmen were important and why the American public needs them (2005). However it is written as a journalistic article so it straddles an objective line and doesn't ask or find reasons why.



### **III: Methodology**

The methodology of this mixed methods study consisted of two surveys, one qualitative and one quantitative. Each was designed to answer the news ombudsmen research questions, to glean the pros and cons of the position and to determine if the ombudsmen's role has a future in American journalism. The qualitative survey was conducted first, and then analyzed to help create questions for the quantitative study.

Again, the questions I sought to answer in this thesis are as follows:

- What factors are leading to the declining number of ombudsmen?
- What can, and what are ombudsmen being replaced with, if anything?
- What will the news ombudsman position look like moving forward?
- Are news ombudsmen wanted by those who work in a newsroom?

#### ***Qualitative Survey***

There were three target populations in the qualitative survey. I attempted to census all known working news ombudsmen. Second, I searched for and found contact information for as many former news ombudsmen as were available. And third, I identified journalism professors from accredited universities around the country with "ethics" listed in their titles or research interests from their respective schools' websites.

The survey generated for the qualitative survey included ten questions, written to ascertain the preliminary thoughts of the target population. A copy of the survey is in the appendix of this thesis.

The qualitative survey was emailed to 88 individuals, with a return rate of 29.5 percent. The email explained the survey, the purpose of the study, stated a research time frame and announced research certification. There were two attachments to the email.

One was an informed consent letter. The other was a document with the ten questions. Respondents were asked to return their answers by filling out the document with the ten questions and remitting it via email.

This survey was administered between January 15, 2014 and February 14, 2014. All surveys were to be returned by either February 14, 2014 or February 28, 2014. February 28 was the last date to return a survey.

To analyze the quantitative survey results, I used a form of coding to identify trends in the data. I found common themes and common answers in the 26 returned surveys and made lists for each question. Then I grouped them together and found there were between three and six common answers on each question. After compiling this information for each of the first nine questions, I created visual charts and explained the data (found in Chapter 4).

I made a few assumptions with this study. First, that the answers of the respondents are representative of the population. Second, it is assumed the respondents told the truth to the best of their knowledge and had no agenda. And finally, it is assumed the questions in the survey were understood as they were meant to be by the respondents.

This study was limited by a few factors. These included time, budget and distance. A better method of collecting data in the qualitative section would have been to travel and personally speak with each news ombudsman, former ombudsman, news executive and ethics professor. There was not enough time to do that, and certainly not a large enough budget to make that happen. Furthermore, there was the limitation of anonymity. With individual one-on-one interviews, respondents may have given permission to use their names with the comments on a case-by-case basis, further adding

credibility to the statements. Finally, there was a limitation of fragmented information. Neither my own research nor that of the ONO could establish a definite number and list of current news ombudsmen in all of America.

### *Quantitative Survey*

The quantitative target population was working journalists in print, broadcast and digital news organizations. I collected and compiled email addresses from news organizations' websites and staff directories. There was no attempt to comb through or pick only desirable job categories. Anyone from the editor position down to the night desk was included when information was available.

The survey questions were generated based on the answers and analysis from the qualitative survey. As I analyzed the qualitative data, 20 questions were formed. A total of 15 questions asked about the thoughts and attitudes journalists had toward ombudsmen, their own newsrooms, and news gathering. Four more questions were added to create the possibilities of cross tabs and one question was added to make sure respondents were at least 19-years-old. A copy of the quantitative survey is in the appendix of this thesis.

The quantitative survey used SurveyMonkey.com and was emailed to a total of 3,094 current working journalists between April 21, 2014 and April 24, 2014. A reminder email was sent two weeks later. A second reminder email was sent two weeks after that. The survey process lasted exactly six weeks. On May 30, 2014, the survey was closed with 528 respondents. The margin of error was 3.88%

To analyze the results, I looked at the raw data from the 528 respondents which were supplied from the questions on SurveyMonkey.com, including charts for each question.

I made a few assumptions for this survey. First, it is assumed the answers of the respondents are representative of the population. Second, it is assumed the respondents told the truth to the best of their knowledge and had no agenda. Next, it is assumed the questions in the survey were understood as they were meant to be by the respondents. Furthermore, it is assumed that the ombudsman position is at least a partially well-known entity. And finally, some survey respondents had to answer many theoreticals, and therefore had to assume they knew how they would handle situations or feelings they have never had or experienced.

This study was limited by a few factors. Like the qualitative study, it was limited by time, budget and distance. If I had more time, I could have collected more responses to reduce the margin of error. Also, a bigger budget would have allowed me to purchase contact lists from organizations. As for distance, only five of the more than 60 news organizations involved in this study were located within 60 miles of UNL. Furthermore, accumulating email addresses from websites meant potential respondents were only those whose emails were publically available. A larger sample would have meant a more wide scale accumulation process that would have taken a great amount of extra time.

***Timetable and Budget***

The overall timetable for this entire thesis was approximately one year. I conducted my research, analyzed findings and wrote results from December 2013 through December 2014. The budget for this thesis was approximately \$100 for the purchase of a few pieces of literature.

## **IV: Findings and Analysis**

### **Qualitative Survey**

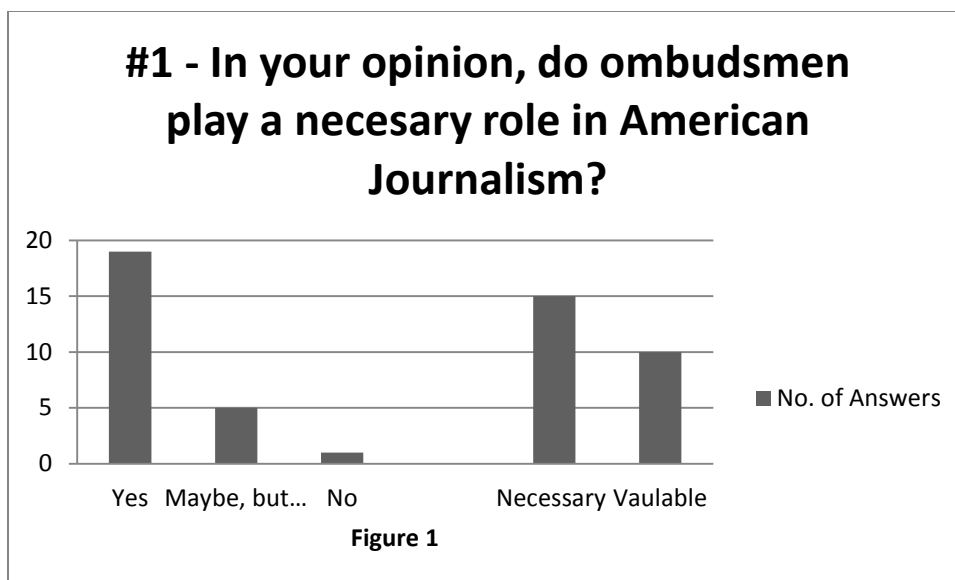
The response rate of the qualitative survey was 29.5 percent for a total of 26 respondents to the questions. Of those 26, one is an editor of a large-market newspaper, one is the president of a state news council, 11 are journalism ethics professors from accredited universities, six are current news ombudsmen and seven are former news ombudsmen. Of the former ombudsmen, five news organizations are represented.

The first question asked, “In your opinion, do ombudsmen play a necessary role in American journalism?” From their responses, there were two sets of answers that came out of the data (Figure 1). First, 19 people answered some form of yes, five said maybe and then a qualifier such as “but” or “however,” and there was one “no.”

In the “maybe” category, the overwhelming sentiment was that while an ombudsman is not always needed, some form of oversight was necessary. One ethics professors simply answered, “Necessary? No. Desirable? Yes.”

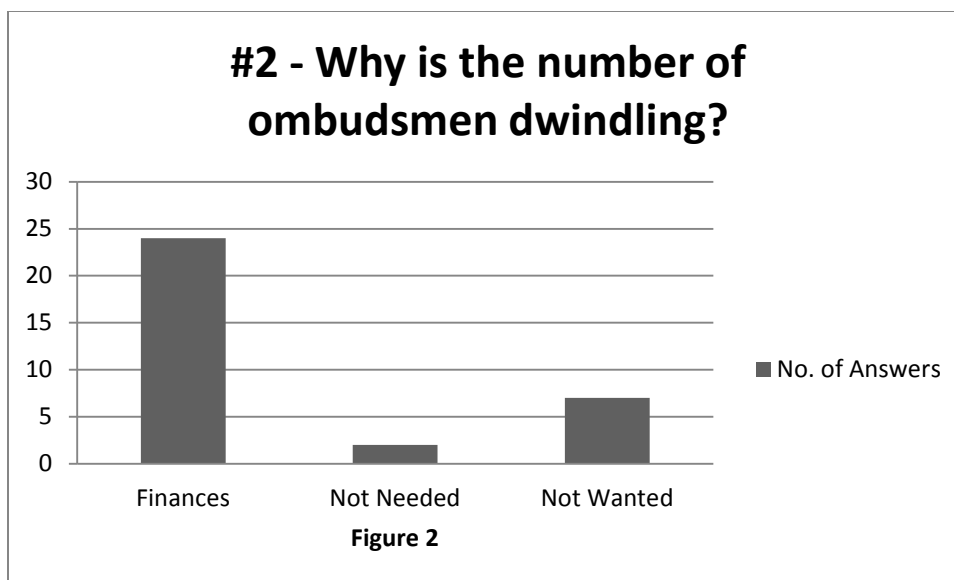
The other set of answers came from the word “necessary” in the question. Of the 26, 15 answered with the word “necessary” in the affirmative, while 10 countered with the word “valuable” as a more accurate term to describe their feelings.

It was no surprise that those who are currently or formerly ombudsmen themselves were on the side of both yes and necessary. One current ombudsman wrote, “They are critical. No news organization can function fairly without independent oversight. A news organization without an ombudsman, public editor, etc. is refusing to be accountable.”



The second question asked was, “The number of ombudsmen in American news has dropped significantly since 2000. In your opinion, why do you think the number of ombudsmen is dwindling?” From this answer set, there were three clear answers (Figure 2).

The first answer was related to cost-cutting, or something related to economics. There were 24 respondents who used some form of a financial reasoning. Next, two said ombudsmen were “not needed.” And last, seven used some form of saying ombudsmen were “not wanted.”

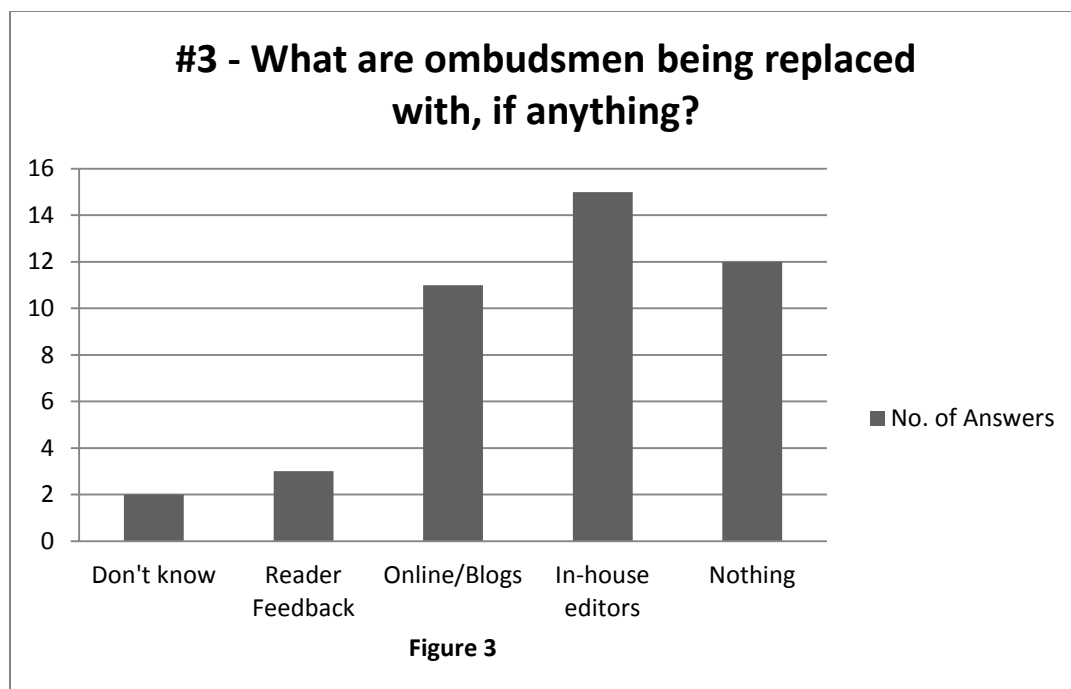


Not only were finances pointed to by the most number of respondents, but it also garnered the strongest sentiment. One former ombudsman from a prominent East Coast newspaper cited a “broken economic model” due to “relentless cost-cutting.” Another from a separate East Coast paper cited newsroom budgets being “radically slashed.”

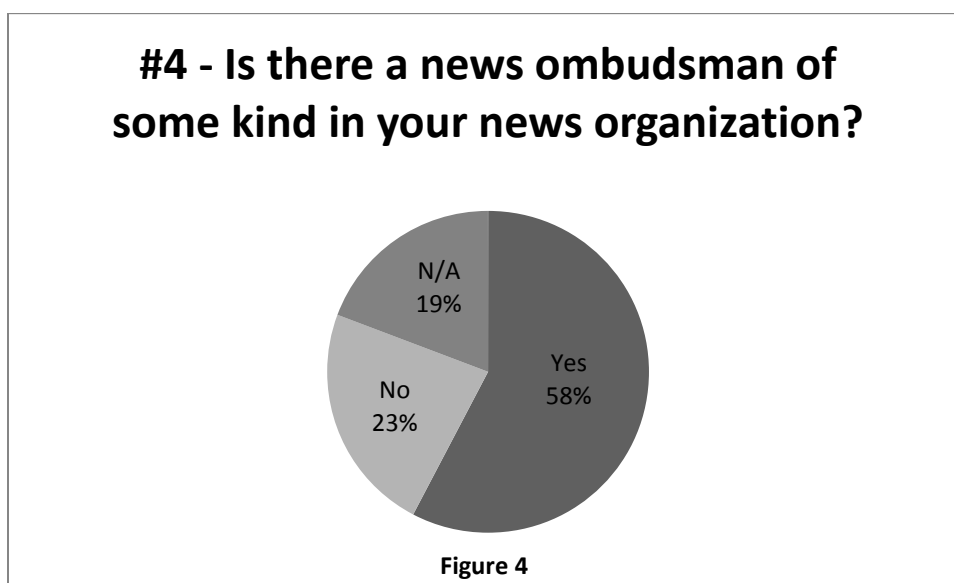
The third question asked, “In your experience, what are ombudsmen being replaced with, if anything?” There were five answers that I gleaned from the data based on this question (Figure 3). Many responses registered multiple answers, thus the high totals.

First, 15 respondents thought some other form of in-house editor was handling ombud duties in addition to their assigned workload, and were therefore more likely to miss details in the process. Next, 12 used some form of the word “nothing.” There were 11 respondents who opined the duties of the ombudsman were moving to the web via blogs, websites, news sites and discussion boards. Finally, three answered that newspapers received criticism through “reader feedback,” while two said they didn’t know.



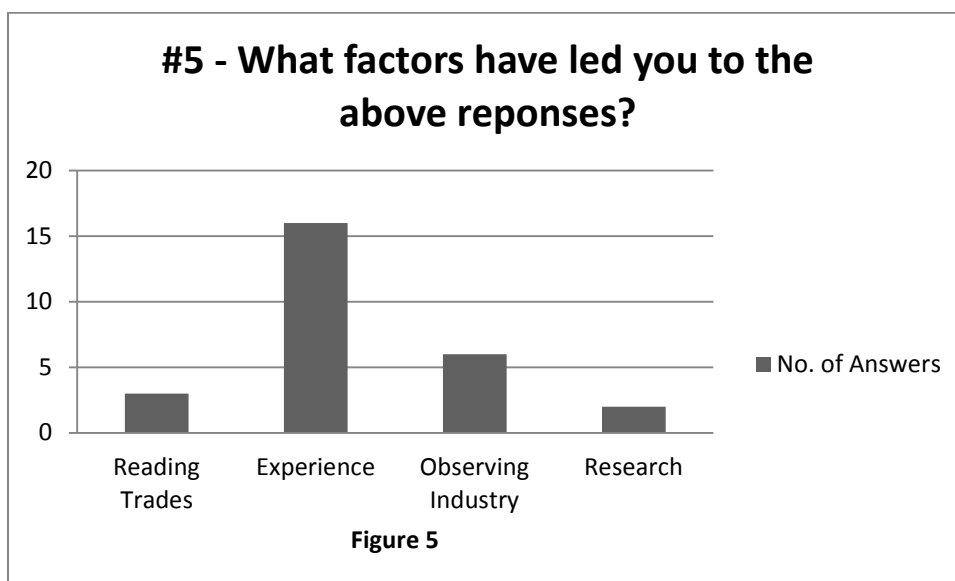


The fourth question polled the respondents. It asked, “Is there a news ombudsman of some kind in your news organization?” The answers were fairly straightforward (Figure 4). Out of 26, 15 said “yes” (58%), six said “no” (23%) and five opted out or said some form of not applicable (19%).



The fifth question asked, “What factors have led you to believe the above responses?” There were four groupings that came from the responses (Figure 5). Some gave multiple answers; 16 answered that experience was a factor; six said they came to their conclusions by “observing industry”; three attributed their thoughts to reading trade publications; and two said they have done some research in this area of media ethics.

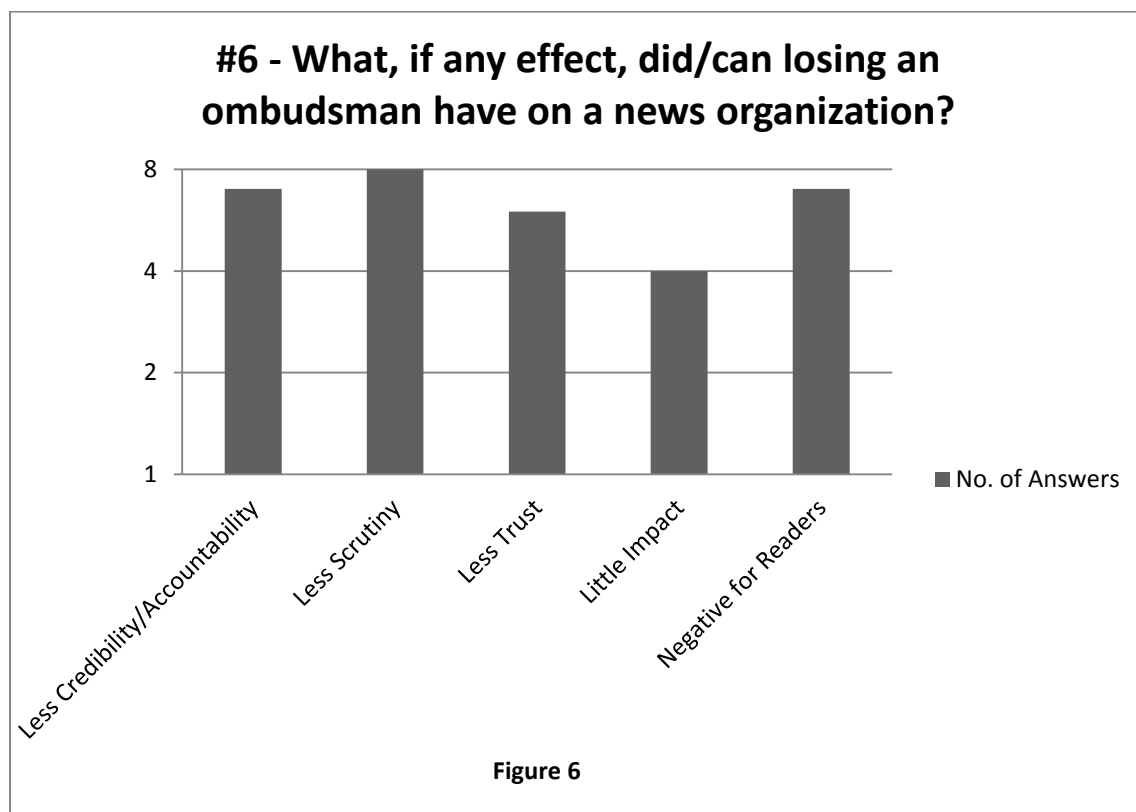
No one chose to elaborate on their answers. That was not surprising as this was a slightly straightforward question. All of the ombudsmen and former ombudsmen pointed to their experience as their guide.



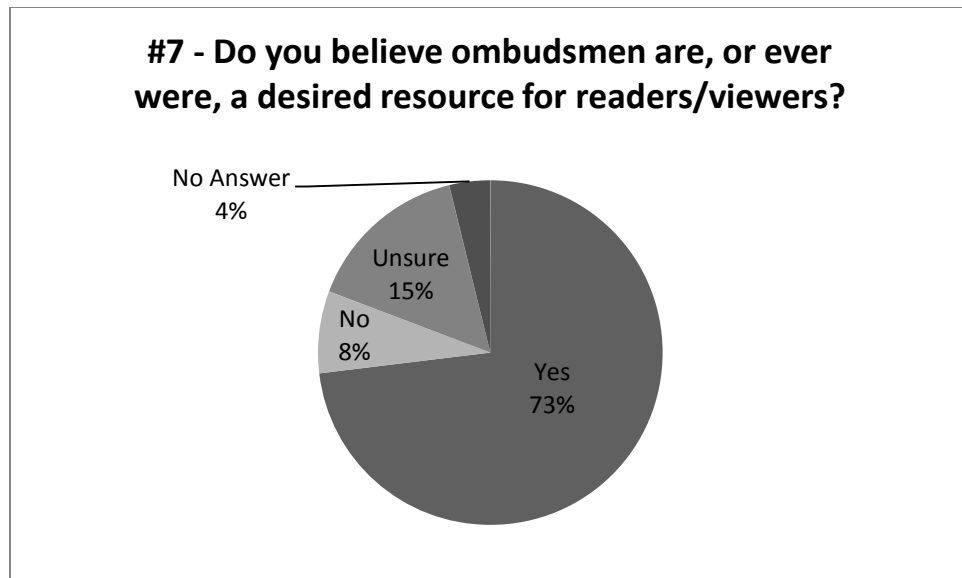
The sixth question asked, “What, if any effect, did or can losing an ombudsman have on a news organization?” This resulted in a wide set of answers (Figure 6). Eight used some form of the phrase “less scrutiny” in their answers when it comes to the work of a news organization. Seven answered that it affects a news organization negatively in that it lowers that organization’s credibility or accountability. Seven said losing an ombudsman would have a net negative effect on the reader. Six commented that there

would be less trust in that news organization. And finally, four responded that they thought there would be “little impact.”

Overall, the answers were similar. One former ombudsman from a prominent East Coast newspaper said, “It risks signaling to readers that the paper doesn’t care about their input – or, worse, that it’s not interested in an honest critique of newsroom practices.”



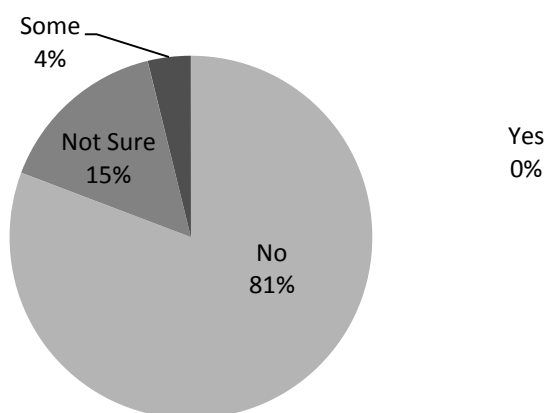
The seventh question asked, “Do you believe ombudsmen are, or were ever, a desired resource for readers or viewers?” The responses were very straight forward. (Figure 7) Of the 26 respondents, 19 said “yes,” four said they “weren’t sure” and two said “no.” In addition, one declined to answer.



There were comments that accompanied many of the answers to question seven. One journalism ethics professor said, “In those instances in which the roll [of ombudsmen] was clearly defined, and where the ombudsman did a good job serving as an independent watchdog on the newspaper’s work, I think readers truly did appreciate the role and function of an ombudsman.” That same professor also stated he or she thought many readers didn’t understand the role of an ombudsman and therefore the idea that they desired it was tough to gauge.

Question number eight asked, “In your opinion, are young readers and others entrenched in online news aware of the presence or function of ombudsmen or public editors in news?” Each respondent narrowed their thoughts to one of four simple responses. (Figure 8) Of the 26 respondents, 21 said “no,” four said they were “unsure” and one said that “some” are. Nobody answered “yes.”

**#8 - In your opinion, are young readers and others entrenched in online news aware of the presence or fuction of ombudsmen or news editors?**

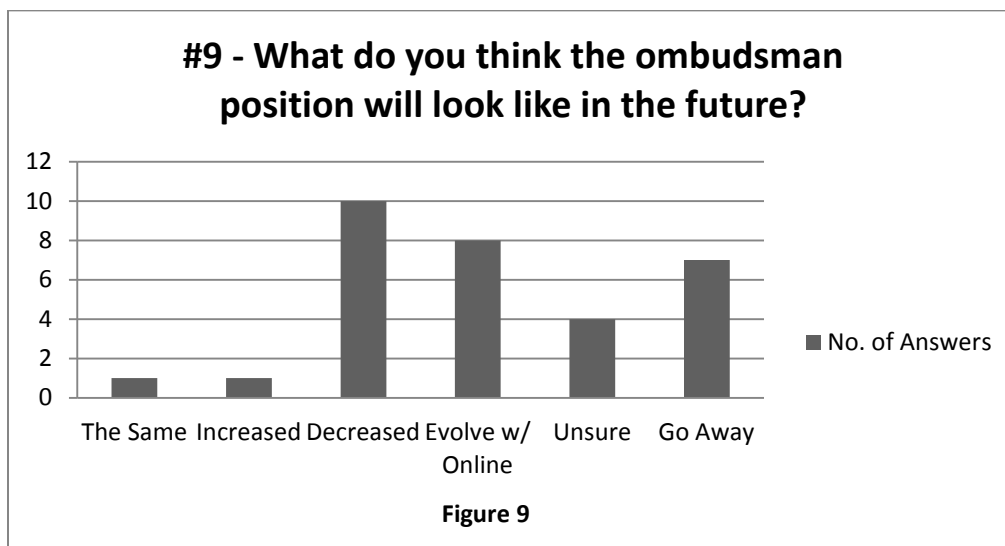


**Figure 8**

Finally, question nine asked, “What do you think the ombudsman’s position will look like in five years? Ten years? If it still exists, how do you see it evolving?” (Figure 9) There were a myriad of thoughts on this topic, as it was open-ended. By studying the responses, I was able to group answers into six definitive categories based on common themes. Some respondents used multiple answers. Ten said they thought the ombudsman role will continue to decrease. Eight thought it would evolve with, and eventually conform to, the online revolution. Seven suspect ombudsmen will go away completely. Four said they were “unsure” and had no guess as to where the position would go. One person thought the position would rebound and see an increase in numbers in the future. Finally, one said the position’s numbers will “stay the same.”

After an initial answer, many respondents put a contingency on what they said by adding they hope the position increases or journalism finds something better to replace them. One former East Coast ombud said, “My hope is that news organizations that feel

they need to eliminate the position will look for legitimate alternatives.” A current ombudsman who said he thinks the position will stay the same said, “There are times decisions made by a newspaper need to be explained...despite what readers on either side of the aisle think, most newspapers are objective.”



I believe there are five key takeaways from the responses to the qualitative survey. First, the majority of the respondents believe news ombudsmen play a role that has value to a news organization. However, the sentiment was never conveyed strongly from any of the respondents that a news ombudsman is completely necessary. The editor positions were mentioned numerous times as hugely important. It seems editor positions are generally highly respected and respondents felt comfortable with them handling various tasks.

Second, the general consensus agreed with the research that the position is in decline. Furthermore, the qualitative responses explain that when an ombudsman role is eliminated within an organization, the reasons are usually tied to tighter newsroom budgets and employee reductions. This is consistent all over the United States in legacy media such as newspapers, magazines and broadcast operations.

Third, respondents overwhelmingly said that once an ombudsman position is eliminated, the duties are either reassigned to another high-level editor or dropped completely from the newsroom. The question did not ask if this was a good or a bad thing. This was consistent across west coast and east coast news organizations, and between print, online and broadcast outlets.

Fourth, the responses indicated that when an ombudsman position is eliminated, the effects are limited to perception. Whether real or imagined, the quantitative or qualitative effect on an audience in a specific market after losing an ombudsman has not been documented in a scientific way. This could be the subject of a future study on this topic.

Finally, it seems the collective outlook on news ombudsman by the respondents is bleak. There doesn't seem to be evidence in the United States that the position will bounce back in numbers and could go away completely. The respondents think it will decrease due to funding cuts, disinterest in news by younger consumers and the growth of online watchdogs. Again, the effect of losing the ombudsman position is not explicitly stated, nor has it been proven. Based on respondent remarks, it appears ethical institutional decision making will still be guided by a set of organizational principles. It also appears that editors will continue to handle some of the duties of an ombudsman, while the remaining duties will unfortunately fall away or become irrelevant as the industry evolves. Perhaps a new version of the position will develop. Whether decision-making will be as good or not is uncertain at this point.

## **Quantitative Survey**

The response rate of the quantitative survey was 17.1 percent. I disseminated a total of 3,094 surveys. A total of 528 people answered the questions. The respondents to this survey were currently working journalists in the United States. The survey was gathered via email addresses gathered from organizational websites of newspapers, online, radio station and television stations from small, medium and large markets. The number of surveys sent to newspaper journalists was higher than other media outlets because of the greater number of newspaper staff and outlets across the country.

The first four questions were basic identifiers. They asked if respondents were at least age 19, their gender, what industry they work in and if they're currently working for a news organization. The responders were 59 percent male and 41 percent female; 83 percent print journalists, 11 percent online/digital and 6 percent broadcast; all but eight are current working journalists.

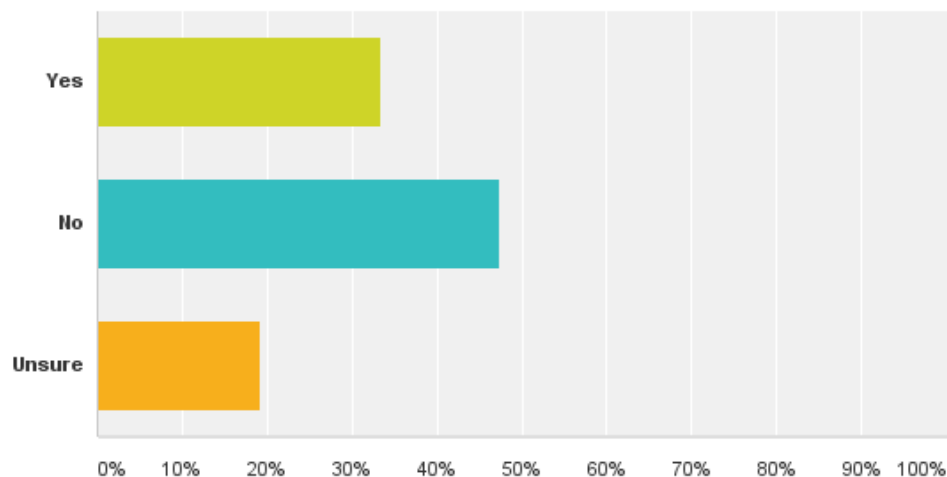
Question five asked, "How many years have you worked as a journalist or in the journalism field." The results showed 60 percent of respondents have worked in the journalism for 20 or more years, 10 percent have worked 15-20 years, 10 percent have worked 10-15 years, 10 percent worked 5-10 years and 10 percent have worked less than five years.

Question six asked, "Do you believe your news organization could use help enforcing ethical standards?" The results (Figure Q6) showed 47 percent said "no," 33 said "yes" and 19 were unsure.



### Q6 Do you believe your news organization could use help enforcing ethical standards?

Answered: 520 Skipped: 8

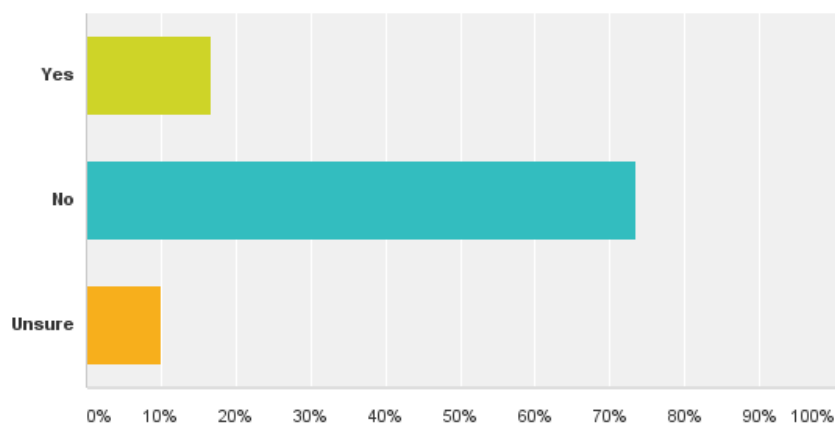


Question seven asked, "Do you know what function an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative plays in a news organization?" Of the total respondents, 92 percent answered "yes" while 8 percent answered "no."

Question eight polled the journalists to see if there was an ombudsperson of some kind in their news organization currently. Of the total respondents, (Figure Q8) 73 answered "no," 17 said "yes" while 10 were unsure.

**Q8 Is there an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative in your news organization?**

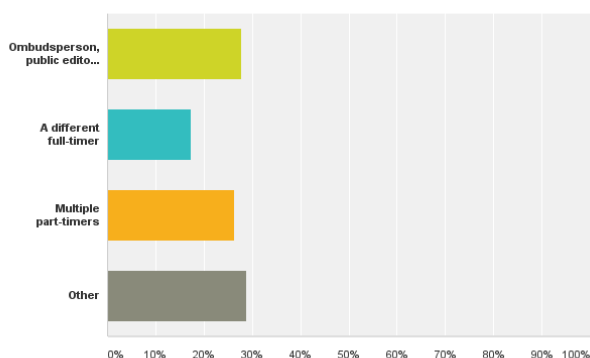
Answered: 523 Skipped: 5



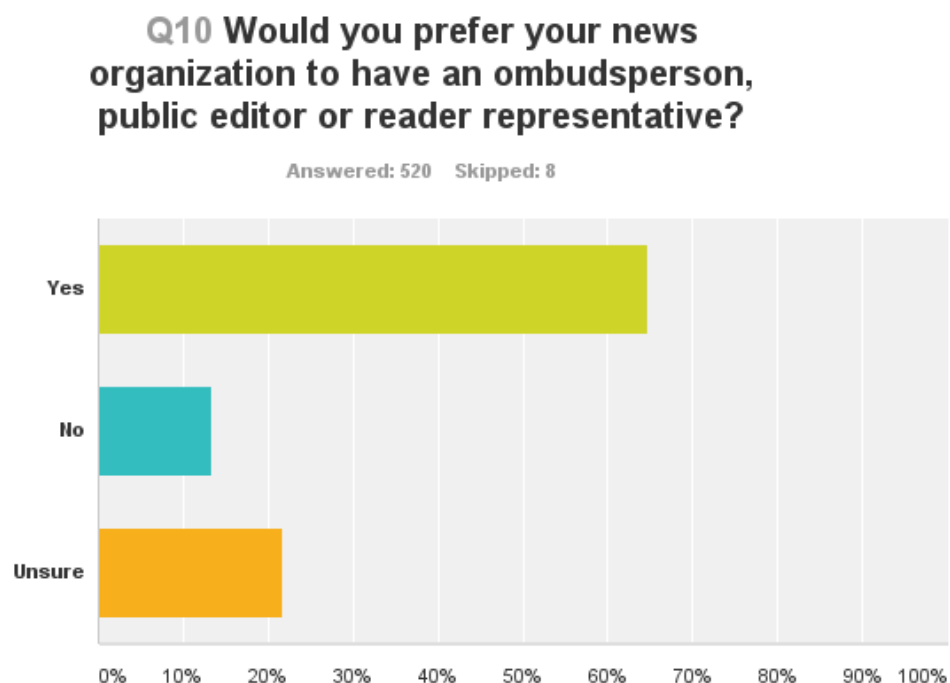
Question nine asked those surveyed to put themselves in the shoes of an editor making a budget, and who they would cut if money was tight (Figure Q9). Twenty-nine percent answered “other,” 28 percent said ombudsperson, 26 percent answered multiple part-timers and 17 percent said a full-time staff member.

**Q9 If you were the editor and forced to make personnel cuts in your news organization, who would you theoretically let go first (assuming there was an ombud at your organization)?**

Answered: 519 Skipped: 9



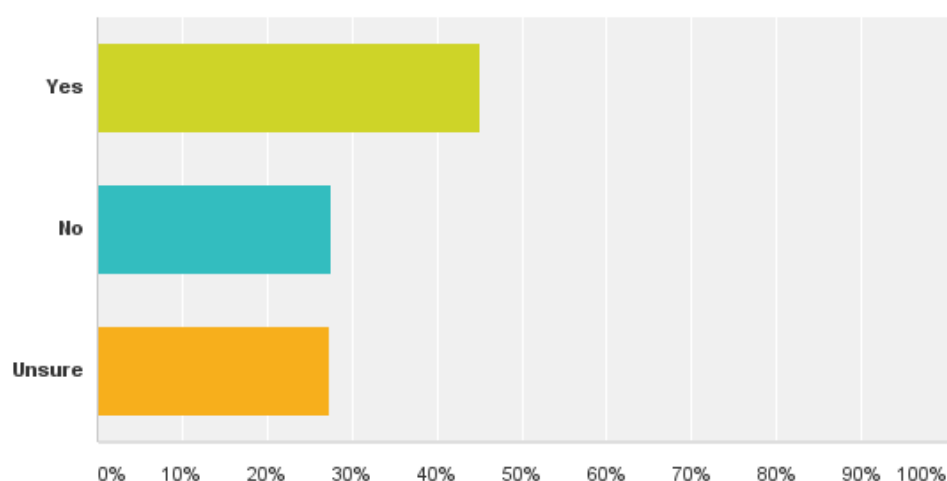
Question 10 asked, “Would you prefer your news organization to have an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative?” The results (Figure Q10) showed 65 percent say “yes,” 22 percent answered that they were unsure and 13 percent said “no.”



Question 11 asked, “Do you believe your news organization needs an ombudsman, public editor or reader representative?” The results (Figure Q11) showed that 45 percent of respondents said “yes,” 28 percent said “no,” and 27 percent said they were “unsure.”

**Q11 Do you believe your news organization needs an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative?**

Answered: 523 Skipped: 5

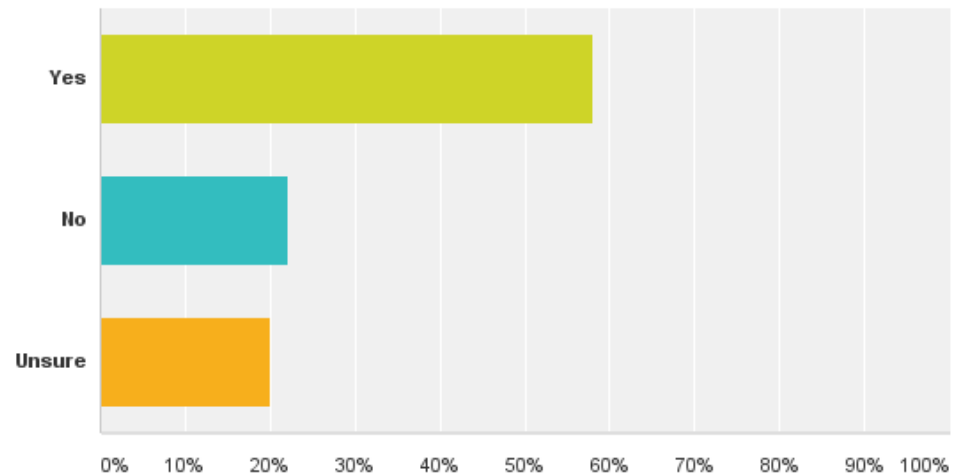


Question 12 posed the question, “On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being negative, 3 being neutral and 5 being positive, rate how having an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative on your news staff would affect your news-gathering process?” Eight people answered with a one, 23 people answered with a two, 286 answered with a 3, 141 people put down a four and 57 people gave it a five. The average was a 3.42, while the median and mode were a three.

Question 13 asked, “Do you feel complaints, requests and inquiries are adequately handled at your news organization?” In the results (Figure Q13), 58 percent said “yes,” 22 percent said “no” and 20 percent responded that they were unsure.

**Q13 Do you feel complaints, requests and inquiries are adequately handled at your news organization?**

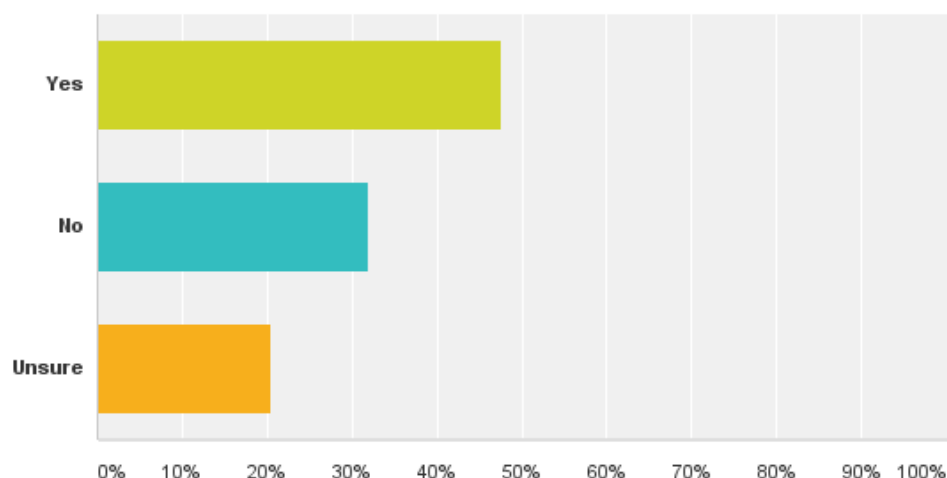
Answered: 521 Skipped: 7



Question 14 posed the query, “Does your editor/news director have the time or resources to handle reader complaints, requests, inquiries or ethical dilemmas?” Of the 523 who answered the question (Figure Q14), 48 percent said “yes,” 32 percent said “no” and 20 percent said they weren’t sure.

**Q14 Does your editor/news director have the time or resources to handle reader complaints, requests, inquiries or ethical dilemmas?**

Answered: 523 Skipped: 5

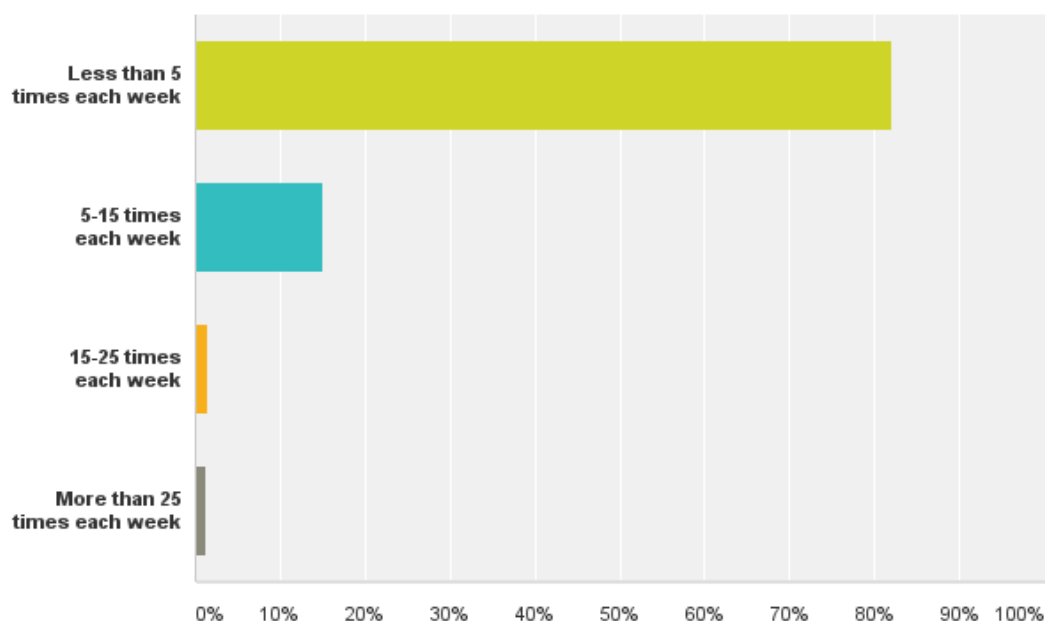


Question 15 asked respondents to rate, on a scale of one to five, with one being none and five being a lot, what kind of effect having an ombudsman would have on the news staff collectively, two people (0.4 percent) answered with a one, 22 people (4 percent) answered two, 237 people (46 percent) gave it a three, while 182 people (35 percent) replied with a four and 74 people (14 percent) gave it a five. The average was a 3.62, while the median and mode were each three.

The 16<sup>th</sup> question asked, “In a typical week, how many times do ethical dilemmas arise in your weekly news gathering and reporting process?” The results (Figure Q16) showed 82 percent thought it was less than five times per week; 15 percent estimated between 5-15 times each week; 1.54 percent (eight people) said they thought it was 15-25 times each week; 1.35 percent (seven people) answered that they estimated they dealt with 25 or more every week.

**Q16 In a typical week, how many times do ethical dilemmas arise in your weekly news gathering and reporting process?**

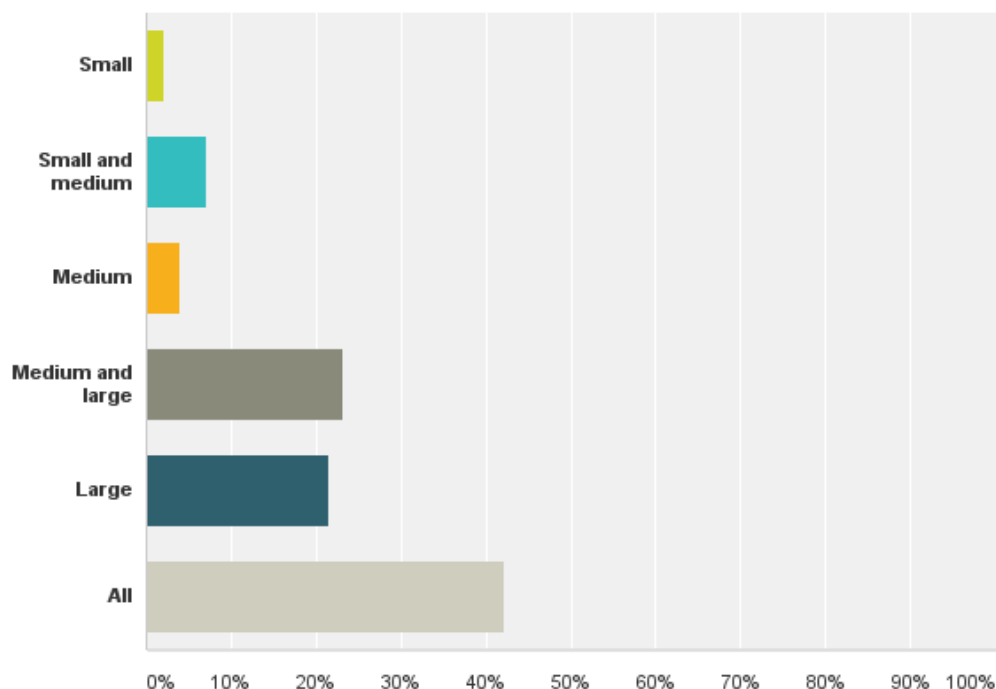
Answered: 518 Skipped: 10



The 17<sup>th</sup> question asked respondents to theorize, “What size market/news organization would an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative have the greatest impact on?” The results (Figure Q17) showed 42 percent say that all sizes would be strongly effected; 22 percent said only large markets would be strongly effected; 23 percent replied the largest impact would be on both large and medium sized markets; four percent (20 people) thought medium would be effected most; seven percent (36 people) thought both small and medium could be the most effected; two percent (11 people) thought only small markets could be largely effected.

**Q17 What size market/news organization would an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative have the greatest impact on?**

Answered: 511 Skipped: 17

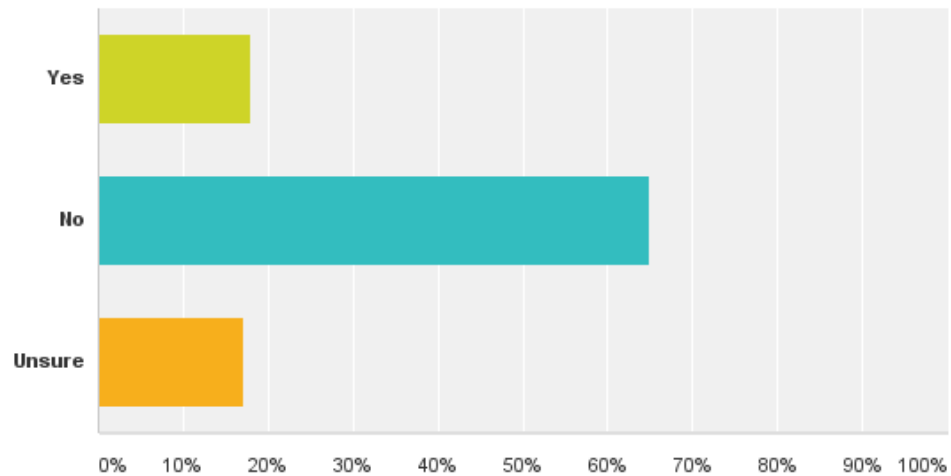


Question number 18 asked, “Can the online blogosphere, Twitter, Facebook and other social media act as an acceptable and capable media critic?” The results (Figure Q18) showed that 64 percent thought they “could not,” 18 percent thought they “could” and 17 percent admitted they were unsure.



**Q18 Can the online blogosphere, Twitter, Facebook and other social media act as an acceptable and capable media critic?**

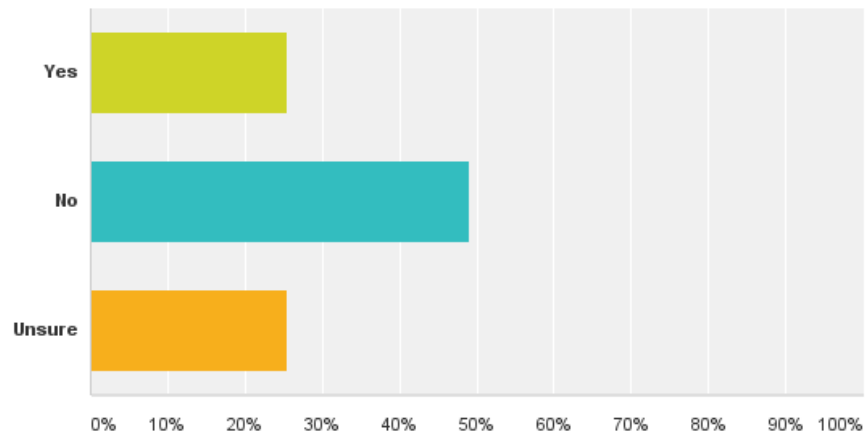
Answered: 518 Skipped: 10



The 19<sup>th</sup> question asked, “Can outside media critics effectively and ethically act as a watchdog for your news organization? The results (Figure Q19) showed 25 percent said “yes,” 49 percent said “no” and 25 percent said they were unsure.

**Q19 Can outside media critics effectively and ethically act as a watchdog for your news organization?**

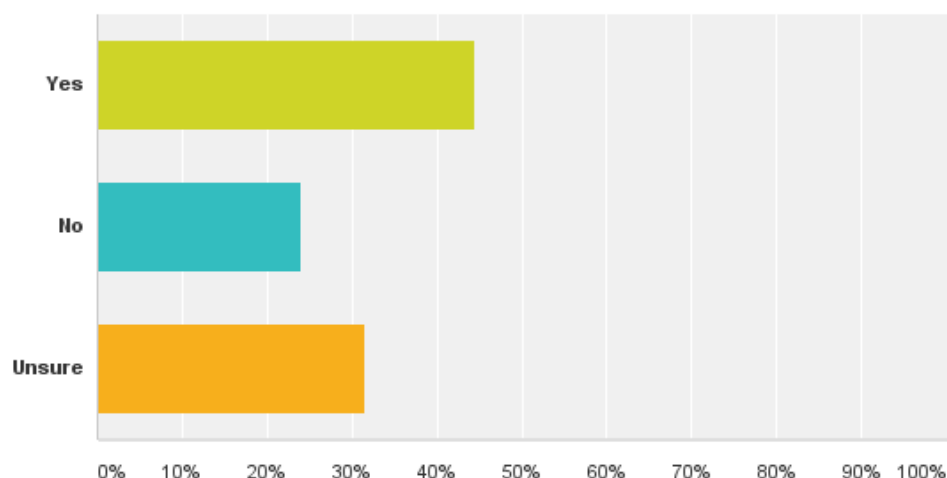
Answered: 523 Skipped: 5



The last question, question 20, asked journalists if they would accept journalism colleges acting as news councils for their news organizations. The results showed (Figure Q20) 44 percent said they would, 24 percent said they would not and 31 percent said they were unsure.

**Q20 As a journalist, would you be accepting of journalism colleges providing a service as media councils for your news organization?**

Answered: 524 Skipped: 4



I believe there are four key takeaways from the quantitative survey data. First, it's clear from the data that journalists understand what an ombudsman is and what the position does for the most part. However, according to answers to questions six and 9-11, journalists don't believe they need help with their duties and an ombudsman is seen as a luxury, not a necessity. It also seems respondents are mostly comfortable putting ombudsmen on the chopping block before other news employees.

Second, journalists agree that on average, ombudsmen have real effects on news coverage, can help an organization's ethics standards, and have a positive effect on a newsroom. Furthermore, based on the data, journalists feel confident their news organizations already handle an ombudsman's duties well. There is seemingly a paradox here; Based on the response data from question 14, fewer than half (48 percent) of the journalists polled believe their editors have adequate time to handle reader complaints,

requests, inquiries or ethical dilemmas. This points to a potential disconnect. It seems journalists in this study feel that ombudsmen are helpful, effective, yet an unnecessary and rare function in a newsroom. Yet, ethical situations are being handled by editors who are too busy to do so with their full attention.

This leads to point number three. I found it interesting that in responses to question 16, 82 percent of the surveyed journalists thought they only face ethical dilemmas five or fewer times each week. Only 1.35 percent thought they deal with ethical dilemmas 25+ times each week. I did not leave a text box in this survey to record qualitative answers to expand on this question. However, two respondents made a point to send me a note letting me know how strongly they felt the answer was “more than 25 each week.”

Finally, the final three questions dealt with external alternatives to ombudsmen and editors handling ethical dilemmas. Overwhelmingly, respondents said they thought blogs and other Internet websites could not (64 percent) act as a capable media critic to their news organization. Similarly, a combined 74 percent said they did not think outside critics could serve as a watchdog for their organization, or that they were unsure about it. Based on those two answers, it is surprising that 44 percent said they would be accepting of journalism colleges acting as media councils for their outlet. Another 31 percent said they were unsure. Only 24 percent said they would not be accepting. Overall, they were more open to journalism schools watching over their work than professionals or the open market of the World Wide Web.

## V: Conclusion

### *Summary*

Today, there may be no more than two dozen ombudsmen left in print, broadcast and online news organizations in the United States and it's becoming increasingly clear that the news ombudsman position is fading away. Despite a positive and worthwhile effect on the news organizations that employed them, and an appreciation of the ombudsman's role by journalists, their numbers are diminishing.

This study's qualitative analysis showed former and current ombudsmen think the position has value and plays a positive role in journalism. The prevailing thought was that after the elimination of the ombudsmen, their duties were spread among other editors. The qualitative study also found respondents thought the negative effect on the audience when losing an ombudsman was more perceived than real, but it still had an effect. Finally, respondents mostly agreed that the ombudsman position doesn't appear to have a reason to rebound and the shrinking revenue stream suffered by many news operations will mean outlets that still have ombudsmen will lose them moving forward.

In a quantitative study of journalists, I found respondents know what an ombudsman is, but don't always believe they need an ombudsman's help making ethical decisions or holding them to high standards of journalism. The respondents made it clear having an ombudsman is seen as a positive for news organizations that have them. But, respondents also indicated that an ombudsman isn't critical in the operation of news organizations and should be one of the first positions eliminated operating budgets get tight. Respondents felt their organizations handle an ombudsman's duties well already but were split on whether their editors have adequate time to handle an ombudsman's

duties. There was no indication respondents wanted an ombudsman if they didn't already have one.

The quantitative study also showed a large portion of journalists think they only deal with ethical dilemmas five or fewer times each week. They do feel the Internet, online blogs, and outside critics cannot serve as watchdogs of their work as journalists. However, they indicated journalism colleges could be an oversight option.

### ***Discussion***

Based on my findings, it appears the news industry is split. Working journalists say ombudsmen are not needed, but are helpful when the position is in place. Former ombudsmen say they think the position is going away. This view appears to come from a place of pessimism, rather than a strong explanation as to why the position is going away. With no strong feeling either way, the ombudsman position will continue to fledge until a major scandal potentially reestablishes its value, or it goes away completely.

I believe the most telling finding in this survey is that journalists overwhelming believe they are only confronted with ethical problems fewer than five times per week. The ombudsmen and former ombudsmen felt journalists deal with many ethical decisions every single day. There could be many in each story that journalists cover. In fact, a few of the polled journalists that did answer "more than 15 each day" emailed me to explain that there was no question their answer was much higher more than 15, and they thought there should be higher values to encourage respondents to think in higher terms. It's possible that the word "dilemma" may have thrown some respondents off. A difference in journalist's perceptions of the operational definition of the work could have played a part in the answering of the question, and the subsequent findings.

Overall, I believe that like many things in media, supply and demand will ultimately decide if news consumers care about ethics and solid journalism practices. Their consumption habits will spell out their levels of interest or apathy in the journalistic process and overall press accuracy. This behavior will, in turn, give news organizations opportunities to use proper tools to determine if ombudsmen are a worthwhile investment for their outlet. In the end, I would not be surprised to see the downward trend in ombudsmen numbers continue in the United States. Finances were a popular reason given by editors and experience ombudsmen for the position's decline, and it continues to play a large part in decision-making in newsrooms across the country.

What will be most telling is what happens in the next few years as the contracts of current ombudsmen are up for renewal. ESPN's ombudsman, Robert Lipsyte will finish his appointment in December 2014. Whether ESPN will fill his spot is to be determined publically. If ombudsmen positions are vacated and not replaced, it is likely the position will never rebound to the numbers we saw in the mid-2000s. Unfortunately, it could be a quiet decline with supporters of the ombudsmen's position hoping it may spark a more open and public discussion about the value and transparency it may provide news organizations. This thesis raises many questions about the future of the industry, especially in terms of ethics and news gathering. The big question raised here is, will the ombudsman position go extinct, rebound, or evolve into something else? Another question the data raises is, are ethics and the duties of an ombudsman important to the news audience? Such findings may also raise questions regarding what the future holds for accountability in news. Will news outlets be more advertising-centric and less reader-centric as revenue becomes scarcer in journalism?

My feeling is that there is a need for as many layers of ethical decision-making as possible in each news gathering process; from conception of a story to its publication or broadcast. What form can or should that take? That was one of the biggest questions to come from this survey's data. News councils, such as the Washington News Council, have begun popping up and doing some of the duties of ombudsmen. Perhaps a combination of news councils and other non-profit watchdog groups, which could include journalism colleges, are part of the future of journalism ethics. Maybe it's more editors, but that's not likely as editor positions have also declined over the past 20 years. Perhaps a strict code of ethics for each outlet, which is enforced by a publisher or editor, is what's needed. Should an open space or timeslot be made available to various editors or news directors to explain problems and answer consumer questions or complaints in each edition or episode of the daily news? There is no perfect answer. That is to say, there should not be a uniform answer. Each outlet, be it print, online, radio, or television, should have its own method of addressing reader issues and major problems in reporting and gathering the news. Whatever it takes for each outlet to be accountable to its audiences I believe should conform to three basic premises.

First, it should be consistent. Creating a way for readers to interact with an outlet or for gatekeepers to explain their processes should be a predictable and expected aspect of the news process of any outlet. Second, it should be featured prominently. These pieces should not be hard to find in the paper, on the website or on the broadcast. Perception is important. The idea that news outlets make their processes open and public is a vital part of staying credible. And third, issues or questions tackled in this space or process should be relevant to the audience of the news outlet. In other words, any



column, article, broadcast piece press release, or whatever form this process takes, should deliberately examine what is most important to the consumers who regularly see the news of that particular outlet.

Many of these ideas cost money, and therefore may be as tricky to institute as was the ombudsman's position they might replace. News councils and non-profit organizations that dedicate themselves to, among other issues, the newsgathering process and ethics of what is published in their states or communities can serve an important accountability role at this juncture. If a news outlet or group of outlets fail to create a process for reader representation and transparent ethical discussion of faulty reporting, outside watchdog outlets become very important.

### ***Limitations***

This thesis had some limitations. Both the qualitative and quantitative studies were limited by time, budget and distance. A better method of collecting data in the qualitative section would have been to travel and personally speak with each news ombudsman, former ombudsman, news executive and ethics professor. There was not enough time to do that, and certainly not a large enough budget to make that happen. Furthermore, both studies had the limitation of anonymity. With individual one-on-one interviews, respondents may have given permission to use their names with the comments on a case-by-case basis, further adding credibility to the statements. Also, a quantitative survey where the locations and news organization titles are named could help identify trends by location or size of news organization.

Furthermore, for the quantitative study, accumulating email addresses from websites meant potential respondents were only those whose emails were publically

available. A larger sample would have meant a more wide scale accumulation process that would have taken a great amount of extra time.

Finally, both studies were limited by the knowledge of the respondents. It has to be assumed that not all of them knew what an ombudsman was and made use of a quick search online which would not fully educated them on the position, it's benefits and its drawbacks.

### ***Future Research***

This thesis study was largely exploratory and introductory. There are many directions myself or another researcher could go with the topic of the news ombudsman. The first step could be to look at the numbers of news ombudsmen outside of the United States. According to ONO, international ombudsmen numbers are going up. Looking into both why and how they are thriving could be worthwhile.

Next, it would be interesting to perform a couple of in-depth case studies. Topics could include looking at the effects of losing an ombudsman on a community or news organization, how news organizations with ombudsmen operate, or the effect of an ombudsmen being active in social media.

Third, a study on the different ways of watchdogging media could be compared side-by-side. These could include journalism colleges, web blogs, independent news critics, and media councils.

Finally, I would be interested to see more studies done on different populations of people for attitudes on ombudsmen, journalism ethics, and the future of the news gathering process in an industry with shrinking resources. The populations could include

advertisers, news consumers, young news consumers, owners of news outlets or international ombudsmen.

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## Appendix A

### Qualitative Questionnaire

1. In your opinion, do ombudsmen play a necessary role in American journalism?
2. The number of ombudsmen in American news has dropped significantly since 2000. In your opinion, why do you think the number of ombudsmen is dwindling?
3. In your experience, what are ombudsmen being replaced with, if anything?
4. Is there a news ombudsman of some kind in your news organization? To your knowledge, why is there *still/no longer* an ombudsman at your news organization?
5. What factors have led you to believe *the above responses*?
6. What, if any effect, *did/can* losing an ombudsman have on a news organization?
7. Do you believe ombudsmen are, or were ever, a desired resource for readers or viewers?
8. In your opinion, are young readers and others entrenched in online news aware of the presence or function of ombudsmen or public editors in news?
9. What do you think the ombudsman's position will look like in 5 years? 10years? If it still exists, how do you see it evolving?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add in regards to this topic?

## Informed Consent

### **Title of Research:**

Modern Ombudsman: Where the position is going, how it's handled, and why we need it in American journalism.

### **Purpose of Research:**

I'm conducting this study (IRB #20140114041 EX) to determine the current state of ombudsmen at U.S. news outlets and gauge where the ombudsman position is headed. You must be 19 years of age or older in order to participate in this study.

### **Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require approximately 15-20 minutes. Simply answer the questions and press "submit."

### **Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

### **Benefits:**

The purpose of this study will help understand the role ombudsmen play in American news, and if there will be a role for the ombudsman in the future.

### **Confidentiality:**

Your answers will remain and kept on a password protected hard drive until the completion of this project, approximately December, 2014.

### **Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

If you have questions concerning this research, please contact me anytime by phone at [402-217-3542](tel:402-217-3542) or by email at [whilligoss@gmail.com](mailto:whilligoss@gmail.com). Or you may contact my thesis adviser, Associate Professor Barney McCoy, at [402-472-3047](tel:402-472-3047) or [bmccoy2@unl.edu](mailto:bmccoy2@unl.edu). If you would like to speak to someone else, please call UNL's Research Compliance Services Office at [402-472-6965](tel:402-472-6965) or [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu).

### **Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

*\*Qualitative survey*

*\*\*Quantitative survey*



## Quantitative Survey Questions

1. Are you at least 19 years of age?
  - a. Yes      b. No
  
2. Are you male or female?
  - a. Male      b. Female
  
3. What industry do you primarily work in?
  - a. Print      b. Broadcast      c. Online/Digital
  
4. Are you currently working for a news organization?
  - a. Yes      b. no
  
5. How many years have you worked as a journalist?
  - a. 0-5      b. 5-10      c. 10-15      d. 15-20      e. 20+
  
6. Do you believe your news organization could use help enforcing ethical standards?
  - a. Yes      b. No      c. Unsure
  
7. Do you know what function an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative plays in a news organization?
  - a. Yes      b. No
  
8. Is there an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative in your news organization?
  - a. Yes      b. no      c. Unsure
  
9. If you were the editor and forced to make personnel cuts in your news organization, who would you theoretically let go first (assuming there was an ombud at your organization)?
  - a. An ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative
  - b. A different full-timer
  - c. Multiple part-timers
  - d. Other
  
10. Would you prefer an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative in your news organization?
  - a. Yes      b. no      c. Unsure
  
11. Do you believe your news organization needs an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative?
  - a. Yes      b. no      c. Unsure

12. On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being negative, 3 being neutral and 5 being positive, rate how having an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative on your news staff would affect your news-gathering process.

(Negative) 1      2      3      4      5 (Positive)

13. Do you feel complaints, requests and inquiries are adequately handled at your news organization?

a. Yes      b. no      c. Unsure

14. Does your editor/news director have the time or resources to handle reader complaints, requests, inquiries or ethical dilemmas?

a. Yes      b. no      c. Unsure

15. On a scale of 1-5, what kind of effect would having an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative have on your news staff as a whole?

(Negative) 1    2    3    4    5 (Positive)

16. In a typical week, how many times do ethical dilemmas arise in your weekly news gathering and reporting process?

a. Less than 5    b. 5-15 times    c. 15-25 times    d. More than 25 times

17. What size market/news organization would an ombudsperson, public editor or reader representative have the greatest impact on?

a. Small    b. Small and medium    c. Medium    d. Medium and large    e. Large    f. All

18. Can the online blogosphere, Twitter, Facebook and other social media act as a capable media critic?

a. Yes      b. No      c. Unsure

19. Can outside media critics effectively act as a watchdog for your news organization?

a. Yes      b. No      c. Unsure

20. As a journalist, would you be accepting of journalism colleges providing a service as media councils for your news organization?

a. Yes      b. No      c. Unsure